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EARLY TRANSPORTATION AND SHIPPING IN LAKE ERIE REGION

by Karl F. Zeisler
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Parts of this story, as I am telling it, have never been written before. In the early days, up to 1835, the northern part of Ohio as we know it today, including the city of Toledo, was part of the territory of Michigan. There existed then a very keen rivalry among Detroit, Monroe, and Toledo as to which should develop into the most important port of entry on the west shore of Lake Erie. Monroe lost this race, and history is not kind to losers. In fact, much of the source material on Monroe's part in this rivalry is to be found only in the Monroe newspapers of the period, and has never been published elsewhere.

In 1816, U. S. Surveyor General Edward Tiffin made a government survey of southeastern Michigan. In those days, just after the war of 1812, the government made land grants to the veterans, which was the purpose of the survey. Tiffin, who was an Ohioan, reported that this part of Michigan was a vast swamp entirely unfit for settlement. The survey was made during a very rainy summer and the huge mosquitoes and the unfriendly Indians did little to improve the impression made on his surveyors.

Governor Lewis Cass persuaded President Monroe to order another survey in 1817. Monroe himself came to Michigan during that summer, and in honor of his visit, Governor Cass bounded and established Monroe County, the second county in the state. The village of Monroe was also incorporated at this time.

As a result of the 1817 survey a United States Land Office was opened in Detroit in 1818, and the first public sale of land in Michigan was made by the Federal government. Before that all persons who purchased land in Michigan bought it from the original French owners.

The second Michigan Land Office was set up in Monroe in 1830, and its district included the land in the southern tier of townships in Washtenaw County. Purchasers either came to Monroe first and located the land they wanted to buy on Farmer's map of Michigan, or explored the wilderness first to find the land they wanted, and then went to Monroe to buy it at $1.25 an acre.

Land travel in those days around Lake Erie was almost impossible much of the year because of the swamps and the lack of roads. The lake afforded a much easier passage. As early as 1819, the first steamer, the "Walk-in-the-Water," appeared on the lake; its image is perpetuated on the Monroe County seal. With the opening of land sales in Michigan, the coming of the steamships and the opening of DeWitt Clinton's Erie Canal in 1825, New England and New York State migrants began the tide of westward travel across Lake Erie and into Michigan.

There were three navigation routes across the lake,- along the northern shore to Detroit, along the southern shore to Toledo on the Maumee River, and straight across the center to Monroe at the mouth of the River Raisin, by far the most direct and shortest. A letter from Andrew Jackson Keeney, who traveled this route to Monroe as a boy in 1838, tells graphically of the experiences and hardships of the early settlers.

Booming with this tide of travel in the 1830's, Monroe proudly called itself the "Independent State," because of its burning ambition to outgrow Detroit and Toledo, and because of the number of leaders it furnished in territorial and state affairs. Its Democratic delegates helped Washtenaw and other outstaters keep the State Constitutional Convention in 1835 from being dominated by the upstart Jacksonian Democrats of Detroit. Monroe further showed its independence by refusing to send delegates to the "Frostbitten Convention" at Ann Arbor in 1836 to ratify the humiliating terms imposed by Congress for statehood: loss of the Toledo Strip. Most of the strip, including Toledo, was up to then a part of Monroe County. To get into the Union, Michigan had to give up this land, and incidentally, about the same time the University of Michigan lost by sale a piece of property which is now in the heart of downtown Toledo.

Alpheus Felch and Robert McClelland were young lawyers from the East who first settled and practiced in Monroe, and later moved to Ann Arbor. Both became Governors of Michigan, and McClelland served in the Cabinet. Monroe leaders in the 1830's also included Austin and Warner Wing and Isaac Christiancy, close friends of Judge Samuel Dexter, founder of the village of that name.

There were many close connections between Monroe and Washtenaw then. In the 1840's a plank road, with tollgates and inns, connected Monroe with Milan, Saline, and Ann Arbor. Our counties also shared in two early circuit riders, a Methodist, and a Lutheran, the Rev. Frederick Schmid.

Captain Robert Rogers, of Rogers' Rangers, was one of the first Englishmen to visit Lake Erie. In 1760 he coasted the southern and western shore on his way to Detroit to take over the post from the French, defeated on the heights of Quebec. Like other early travelers, Rogers missed the mouth of the River Raisin, later to become a busy port, because it was obscured by heavy marsh growth. He camped instead a short way north in Brest Bay, delayed three days by the weather, then went on to Detroit and replaced the French colors with the Union Jack.

Monroe's first sailor was Captain Luther Harvey, who sailed a small sloop in the coastal trade, carrying grain, fish and passengers all in one cargo, from Ohio to Detroit. His "Firefly" made the 35-mile trip from Detroit to Monroe on one occasion in the remarkably fast time of 12 hours.

Another early Monroe leader was Edward D. Ellis who in 1825 brought a printing press across the lake from Buffalo and established in Monroe the second continuously published newspaper in the state, the Michigan Sentinel. It is largely from the pages of his very able paper that the early history of Monroe's port is taken.

An event of great importance was the forming of the La Plaisance Bay Harbor Company, in 1825. It persuaded Congress to appropriate $200 for a survey of the bay for harbor improvements, surveys having been made earlier only for Erie, Pennsylvania, and Cleveland. In 1827, Congress approved General Alexander Macomb's recommendation and appropriated $3977 for a breakwater to improve the harbor. By 1836, the government had spent $20,000 on the harbor, but almost every year storms destroyed the work. Captain Henry Smith, a West Pointer, was sent to make a further survey. He recommended a wholly new plan of cutting a ship canal from the bend in the River Raisin straight east into the lake, and in 1834 estimated the cost at $55,000. Work was started next year with a $30,000 appropriation to eliminate the long, winding course of the shallow river and the storm-swept harbor in the bay. The City of Monroe, with only 3,000 inhabitants, also raised $50,000 in a bond issue to cut a second canal, shortening the channel to the docks at the edge of town.

These were large undertakings, and as usual the estimates proved far too modest. It took 17 years to complete the canals, as much of the dredging was done by hand, but by 1842 channels were deep enough for smaller ships to reach the docks. Then the warehouses that had been built at the bay were moved across the ice to the new port.

In 1836, another easterner, John Q. Adams, got a charter for the La Plaisance Bay Harbor Company to build the River Raisin and Lake Erie Railroad. It ran 2½ miles from the docks to the bay, a team of horses hauling the flat cars to bring passengers and their baggage into town. Opened in 1836, this may have been the very first railroad in Michigan, as the Detroit & Pontiac did not reach Royal Oak till 1838, and the Erie & Kalamazoo did not run from Port Lawrence, now Toledo, to Adrian till 1837. It was the earliest Michigan ancestor of the New York Central.

Governor Stevens T. Mason's Internal Improvement Act of 1837 launched the state on railroad building. One line, the Michigan Central, was to run from Detroit to Lake Michigan, and the other, the Michigan Southern, from Monroe to New Buffalo. The state bought the River Raisin & Lake Erie as a part of this southern line. While Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti watched the rails extend westward from Detroit, Monroe was watching its line pushed toward Adrian.

In 1844, the state, badly in debt, sold both lines, the Central to Detroit capitalists, and the Southern to Monroe and New York owners. Both then engaged in a race to reach Chicago, and Chicago papers report the arrival of the trains on the same day, May 22,1852.

There was also rivalry between the roads for the lucrative Lake Erie traffic, and from about 1848 on both of them leased and then built the largest luxury steamers on the lake. For a time Monroe had the advantage, because both its steamer route and its rail route were much shorter from Buffalo to Chicago than the Michigan Central's. In the heat of competition, the big white steamers of the rival lines raced across the lake, the captains egged on by wagers of the passengers, with the tragic result that the overcrowded boilers exploded and hundreds of lives were lost.

This race for the westward movement of the settlers continued until the panic of 1857. This shut off the westward flow and reduced lake traffic to a trickle. Moreover, by 1855, rail lines had been completed around Lake Erie on the north and south shores, outmoding the beautiful white sternwheelers. They were tied up at their docks in the panic year, and never again sailed the lakes, being refitted as barges and drydocks. Such luxury steamers were not seen again on the lakes for many years.; the largest were 300 feet long with a 40-foot beam and huge engines; they cost as much as $300,000 each.

After 1857, the settlers came to Michigan by train, and the picturesque era of the lake traffic and the three rival ports was ended. Monroe never fully recovered from the blow!

Ann Arbor, Michigan
January 29, 1952

THE MONROE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

by Agnes M. Funk (Mrs. H. W.)
On staff of Monroe Evening News

The Monroe County Historical Society was formed on November 21, 1938, by 23 men and women interested in "preserving and publicizing the fascinating history of the county." W. C. Sterling, now president-emeritus, was the first president.

Even at the first meeting members began thinking of a museum, and of work with school children to keep alive the history of the county and to make all its citizens proud of and aware of that history.

Since that time membership has grown to approximately 200, the museum is well set and is gaining in influence and interest. Annual meetings are established, together with an annual dinner program with outstanding speakers. Various programs during the year have appealed to townspeople and members of the society alike.

Under Mrs. Mildred McMichael, advisor, the Monroe Junior Historical Society was formed and became the first in the state to be affiliated with the Historical Society of Michigan. It is represented on the senior executive board of the County Society and its members usually attend the dinner meeting in a group in place of a regular meeting that month.

Another project planned by the Society, delayed by the war and other emergencies, is an Historic Trail of marked spots in and near the city. It is again on the list of active projects.

The Monroe Sentinel, publication of the Society, was first issued November 15, 1946. Nine issues in all have appeared, with a tenth in the hands of the printer. Volume I has 3 numbers, Vol. II has 2, and Vol. III has 4. Karl F. Zeisler is the editor.

Officers of the Society for 1952 are: President, Mrs. Robert P. Heston; Recording Secretary, Edmund R. Childs; Corresponding Secretary, Maribel Vivian; and Treasurer, R. Harry Smith.

Monroe, Michigan
February 8, 1952

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From the Washtenaw Historical Society, friendliest editorial greetings and congratulations to our Monroe County neighbors. Although only 14 years old, yet their Society can point with pride to real accomplishments. The way they are putting Monroe on the map might be regarded as a step in redeeming the lost place in history mourned by Mr. Zeisler.

NEW MEMBERS
Since last published list, Oct., 1950

John Allison*
Mrs. Edward Beissel, Chelsea
Marie E. Benzin
Robert Bock
Mayor William E. Brown
Dorothy Buckley
Mr. & Mrs. J. C. Carter
Mrs. Ruby R. Dillon
Mrs. D. Ward Edwards
President Harlan Hatcher
Mrs. Walter Hiscock
Edgar F. Kaiser, Willow Run**
Mrs. S. L. Kellerman, Kent City
Mr. & Mrs. W. B. Krag
Grace Rash (reinstated)
Mrs. Charles Robbins and Charles, Jr.
Mrs. Nathalie Wahr Sallade**
Mrs. Lillian Schleh
Mrs. Florence Slater
Mrs. J. C. Towner, Dexter
Mrs. E. M. Wagner
Ida Weitbrecht (raised from active to Life member)**
Henriette Wurster, Chicago, Ill.**

* Address Ann Arbor unless otherwise indicated.
** Life members

EIGHT LOSSES BY DEATH
Since last published list
(Deeply felt by the Society as real losses)

Mrs. Mary Adams, Jan. 27, 1952
Richard Clyde Ford, Ypsilanti, May 8, 1951
Mrs. Eleanor Hogle, Sept. 2, 1951
Mrs. Emil Lorch, July 23, 1951
Mrs. Flora Osborn, Sept. 1, 1951
Dr. Jay Osborne (Charter member), Jan. 24, 1952
Mrs. Flora B. Reinhardt, Feb. 23, 1952
Agnes Inglis, Jan. 29, 1952

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For information about Washtenaw Impressions or the Washtenaw Historical Society, address the Secretary-Treasurer, Mrs. I. Wm. Groomes, 1209 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Ella M. Hymans
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